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## **Research Paper**

### **Exploring the Development of Learner Autonomy from a Postmodern and Social Constructivist Perspective: Prioritizing Voices**

**Dr Christine O'Leary, Sheffield Hallam University**

Learner autonomy defined as the learners' ability to take charge or control of their own learning (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2011), is considered as a key to effective lifelong learning (Dam, 2011). However, the multidimensional nature of the concept combined with the need to access both individual and social constructions, from a social constructivist perspective, presents significant ontological and epistemological challenges. Although learner autonomy and its development have been explored using a range of paradigms and theoretical frameworks, none of the studies appear to have examined its development, within a formal educational context, from a postmodernist perspective. This article aims to discuss the benefits and practical implications of using a postmodernist approach to exploring the development of learner autonomy, in undergraduate specialist and non-specialist learners, studying advanced level French in an institution-wide language programme, within a large UK Higher Education Institution. After considering the background and examining in some detail the learner autonomy construct, the paper will discuss the choice of methodology, in relation to the challenges presented by prioritising voices, within a multifaceted and multi-dimensional theoretical framework. It will show how it was applied in practice, using a few illustrative extracts from the study's data analysis. The article will conclude with some recommendations and considerations of the limitations of such an approach, together with some reflection on the process and outcome of the case study research, including some implications for practice in a formal educational context. (236 words)

#### **Key words**

learner autonomy, postmodernist, research, Higher Education

Cognitive and more particularly constructivist views of student learning suggest that learners' active and independent/interdependent involvement in their own learning, including shaping the environment in which it occurs, increases motivation to learn (Raya & Lamb, 2008; Hoidn & Kärkkäinen, 2014) and improves academic achievement (Bandura 1977, 1986; Findley & Cooper 1993; Feuerstein, Klein & Tannenbaum, 1991). The development of autonomy also depends on students' opportunity to influence the learning process (Boud, 2012).

As a key to effective lifelong language learning (Dam, 2011), the development of autonomous language learners has been the subject of many studies (e.g. Raya & Lamb, 2008; Benson, 2011; Everhead & Murphy, 2015) since Holec (1981) first defined the term as

learners taking charge of their learning. However, many authors such as Little (2000) have warned against simply equating an autonomous learner with an independent one, pointing out that the development of a capacity for autonomy does not happen in isolation but through interactions involving peers and teachers (Raya & Lamb, 2008; Raya et al., 2008). To become autonomous, therefore, learners need to develop the psychological and emotional capacity to control their own learning collaboratively as well as independently (Kohonen, 1992; O’Leary, 2014; Oxford, 1990, 2016).

However, the multidimensional nature of the concept (Benson, 2011) combined with the need to access both individual and social constructions presents significant ontological and epistemological challenges. Avoiding prioritising some voices, such as my own or theorists' from the literature, over the students' was of particular concern when selecting my methodology.

Learner autonomy and its development have been explored using a range of paradigms and theoretical frameworks ranging from positivist quantitative approaches such as Fazey and Fazey (2001)'s study of the autonomy of 1<sup>st</sup> year undergraduates to narrative qualitative ones (e.g., Karlsson & Kjisik, 2009). Although Postmodern theory has been associated with practical applications for promoting learner autonomy (e.g. Curtis, 2004), I have not found any studies that have researched the development of learner autonomy using a Postmodern orientation, at least not explicitly.

This paper aims to discuss the benefits and practical implications of using a postmodernist approach to exploring the development of learner autonomy, in undergraduate specialist and non- specialist learners, studying advanced level French modules<sup>i</sup> in an institution-wide language programme within a large UK Higher Education Institution, from a social constructivist perspective. After considering the background to the study and a detailed examination of the learner autonomy construct, the paper will discuss the choice of methodology, in view of the challenges presented by prioritising voices, within a multifaceted and multi-dimensional theoretical framework. I will show how it was applied in practice, using a few illustrative extracts from the study's data analysis. I will conclude with some recommendations and consideration of the limitations of such an approach, together with some reflection on the process and outcome of the case study research.

## **Background to the Study**

The research was based on a case study of undergraduate specialist and non-specialist students studying French at the advanced stages of the University Language Scheme (ULS) - Stage 5 (CEFR<sup>ii</sup> B2/C1) and Stage 6 a or b (CEFR C1).

The ULS, as an Institution-wide Language Programme, offers electives to students of other disciplines (non-specialists) and core modules to students majoring or minoring in Languages (specialists), alongside other specialisms such as International Business, Tourism or TESOL, in six stages of languages, mapped on the CEFR, from ab-initio (A1) to degree standards (C1). Although the ULS comprises of seven languages, only Spanish, French, German and Italian can be studied at the two most advanced levels due to more limited demand in other languages at these levels overall.

The ULS has a vocational orientation. At the advanced levels, the scheme had three key aims:

- the development of language skills to enable students to function in both a social and business environment;
- the acquisition of basic knowledge of the country/countries where the target language is spoken, together with the development of students' awareness of its/their society, traditions, customs and business culture;
- the fostering and development of autonomous language learners.

Although the language study on the ULS could be described as common core rather than discipline specific, Stages 5 and 6 module designs allowed students specialising in other disciplines to focus part of their language study on their subject specialism through the production of a subject-specific portfolio, report and presentation. In the case of students majoring or doing a minor in Languages at ULS 6, the portfolio involved the development of more specialist language skills such as negotiation, translation and interpreting. To encourage planning and reflection, each portfolio included a planning record and self-evaluation (normally in L2 although some were written in L1). ULS 5 and 6a students were also encouraged to keep a research diary in L1 or 2. A summary of the assessment programme for both the specialist and non-specialist routes can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Assessment Programme

ULS 5 & 6-Assessment Programme			
Semester	ULS 5	ULS 6	
		Route a (non-specialists)	Route b (Languages specialists)
1	<p><i>Oral with tutor: defending their opinion (25%)</i></p> <p><i>Translation into English (25%)</i></p>	<p><i>Mini-portfolio: negotiation/ translation (50%)</i></p>	<p><i>e.Portfolio: negotiation/ translation/ interpreting (10, 50 or 70%)<sup>iii</sup></i></p>
2	<p><i>Written portfolio and report on topic of own specialism (25%)</i></p> <p><i>Presentations on above topic (25%)</i></p>	<p><i>Written portfolio and report on specialist area (25%)</i></p> <p><i>Presentations on above topic (25%)</i></p>	<p><i>Time-constrained translation (15, 20 or 25%)<sup>iv</sup></i></p> <p><i>Interpreting with tutor (15, 25 or 25%)</i></p>

## Learner Autonomy as a Construct

### *Individual level*

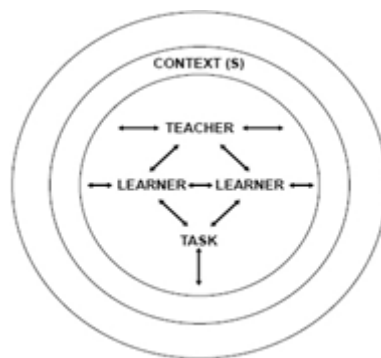
As a starting point for my PhD study (O'Leary, 2010), I considered to use Benson's (2001) model of autonomy for control at the individual level (p. 86) and William and Burden's (1997) social constructivist model for learning and teaching (p. 43) for the social dimension of the process. On the basis of an extensive literature review relating to learner autonomy, Benson (2001, p. 87) identifies control over cognitive processes as probably “the most fundamental level.” His model included three key areas for control over cognitive processes:

- *attention* active engagement with linguistic input, involving conscious apprehension and awareness of specific aspects of the language;

- *Metacognitive knowledge* at task level encompassing any evidence of: decision to carry out the task, decisions about content, progression, place and time of learning, the selection and use of cognitive strategies, and the criteria selected for evaluation;
- *reflection* any form of reflection on the language, the learning process, their role within that process, (pp. 86-87).

### ***Social level***

William and Burden's (1997, p. 43) social model of the teaching and learning process complemented Benson's (2001) individual model through taking into account the learning environment and the learning partnerships between teachers and learners. I adapted the model slightly by adding the learner to learner dimension as shown below (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* A social constructivist model of the teaching-learning process, adapted from Williams and Burden (1997, p. 43) adapted by O'Leary (2014, p. 22).

### ***The Significance of Metacognition***

Whilst attention and reflection were clearly important, my initial review of literature suggested that the development of metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1995, 1998) was perhaps the most significant in the development of autonomous learners. This led me to choose a working title of “The Development of Metacognition within a Social Context” as a working title for my thesis.

## **Postmodernism as a theoretical framework: what can it offer to learner autonomy research?**

### ***Other studies***

Previous studies on learner autonomy have used a very wide range of paradigms. For instance, Cotterall (1995) and Lai (2001) have used psychometric approaches using and/or developing rating scales as part of their study of the development of autonomy. More recently, mixed methods using a (*neo*) *realist* and *pragmatist*<sup>v</sup> theoretical framework have been a methodology of choice (see Cooker, 2015 or Tassinari, 2015). Practitioner action research involving a strong reflective/reflexive element within the process was favoured by researchers such as Champagne et al. (2001) and Karlsson (2008). Complexity theory seeking to reflect the complexity of the learning process in relation to autonomy has also gained ground as a theoretical paradigm (see for instance Dörnyei, Macintyre & Henry, 2015), whilst narrative and highly inductive qualitative stories can be used to privilege the learner(s)'s voice (see Benson & Cooker, 2013). However, I was looking for an approach that would enable me to access all the voices, including the teacher's perspective without privileging any. I was also conscious of the potential influence of dominant theories within the literature. In addition, I wished to reflect the social interactive dimension of the research and its closeness to practice, within a social constructivist paradigm.

### ***Postmodernism as a research orientation***

Whilst Sarup (1993) suggests that modernism can be seen as the culture of modernity underpinned by a belief in the power of science to deliver unified and legitimate knowledge, Postmodernism, on the other hand, tends to reject "metanarratives" which offer this unified and monolithic view of the world (Lyotard, 1984). Derrida (1976) rejects these narratives and their claims to unmediated knowledge. He asserts that we can only know reality through our own concepts or constructs within the theoretical frameworks we develop to make sense of our experience and research data. The postmodern approach therefore assumes a pluralist perspective and multiple "truths" contingent to specific settings. Haber (1994, p. 13) stresses that Postmodernism is both "*committed to*" and "*constitutive of difference*". Although there is not one unified postmodern theory, postmodern theorists would all agree on- "the arbitrary and conventional nature of everything social- language, culture, practice, subjectivity, and society itself" (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 20). Despite its inherent relativism (Hargreaves,

1994) and much criticism of its excessive relativity (Hill et al, 1999), a postmodern stance can offer new insights into complex and dynamic phenomena, in a situated context such as researching educational practice (Brown & Jones, 2001; Stronach & McLure, 1997). Moderate postmodernism that is a variant of postmodernism which accepts cumulative knowledge (Roseneau, 1992), including non-postmodernist as well as postmodernist works, enables rigour (i.e. in-depth theoretical consideration) without rigidity (e.g. imposition of a metanarrative). This study which considered works emanating from various philosophical/theoretical traditions came under the category of “moderate postmodernism.” Fox (2000, p. 19), for example, distinguishes between three key principles guiding postmodern research, particularly in relation to practitioner research/action research namely: "Knowledge is local and contingent; the research is constitutive of difference" meaning that the research question should neither “close down or limit the ways in which the subjects will be understood or conceive of themselves,” i.e. participants should not be framed at the outset; and "the theory should be related to practice" suggesting that research questions and "their theoretical consequences will be of direct practical relevance to practice" (p. 20).

There are four main reasons why I decided to adopt a postmodernist stance to explore the main themes of my study:

- the first one was the need not to privilege individual or groups of individuals' constructions of the world, including my own based on experience and/or existing literature, reflecting a "pluralist perspective";
- the second was the situated nature of the study implying that the learners' constructions or their version of the “truth” is contingent to the specific setting of the research;
- the third one was the move away from macro theories as a theoretical framework to a “micro logical/theoretical” level, more in line with the study's participants’ personal theory and closer to practice;
- the fourth one was the dynamic nature of the research, and the possibility of change at a micro level working within the constraints imposed by the wider society, rather than framing the research within a critical theory of resistance or conflict, in a quest for an ideal practice (Brown & Jones, 2001) or an absolute solution to the development of autonomy.



This was not to negate the political and ideological nature of the concept of autonomy which Pennycook (1997, p. 35) stresses as central to the notion. It is clear that the psychological dimension of autonomy does not operate in a vacuum, independently of the cultural and social values of the broader society, as Pennycook (1997, p. 44) rightly points out. Brown and Jones (2001) speak of "critical pedagogy in a postmodern world" because we need to recognise that these values, and the need for as well as type of change, will be different between individuals and communities depending on their background, education and experiences.

## **Focus of the Study**

### *Questions*

The key questions posed in the case study relating to the development of autonomous language learners were:

- ▶ 1) What do undergraduate language students believe about learning and their role within the process?
- ▶ 2) How do these beliefs relate to current conceptualisation of learner autonomy in existing literature?
- ▶ 3) What implications might this have on the conceptualisation of learner autonomy, and associated operationalisation of the construct within the language curriculum and beyond?
- ▶ 4) Is it possible to influence students' constructions of learning, particularly in relation to tutor dependence?
- ▶ 5) What is the impact of students' beliefs/constructions of learning on their learning, in relation to the development of autonomy in practice, within the languages curriculum?

### *Learner Voices*

As I began the PhD study, I was particularly concerned with the need to ensure that all voices were heard, including the learners and my own as learner researcher-practitioner. I was also particularly concerned with the application to practice as an outcome of the research.

## **Implication of a Postmodernist Orientation**

### ***Methodology***

Using a postmodern research orientation has a number of practical implications on the research design, the way data is collected and analysed. The first consideration was the best way to approach the literature review to avoid framing the participants' responses around particular theories. I was also aware of my own focus on the development of metacognition as the corner stone to learner development in relation to autonomy. I decided to divide the research into two phases. *Phase 1* would access the learners' voices prior to any literature being considered apart from the main definition for learner autonomy, answering *question 1* and starting the following literature review from a student perspective. The *literature review* and its implications would respond to *questions 2, 3 and 4*. The *second phase* would concentrate on the practical implications in answer to *questions 5*.

### ***Dealing with language***

One of the key issues of using a postmodernist research design was giving due consideration to language and the plurality of meaning implied in this theoretical orientation. This meant taking a poststructuralist rather than a structuralist perspective i.e. moving away from Saussure's (1910-11) structuralist theory of language, where the link between the signifier or word/system of representation and signified or the physical object/idea it represents is constant and stable, to poststructuralist notions of plurality of meanings and shifting meanings. For Derrida as cited in Sarup (1993), signifiers and signified are continually separating to reattach themselves in "new combinations" (p. 33). In other words, whilst the signifier and signified are still closely linked, the signifier has supremacy over the signified. In practical terms, we cannot assume that there is one privileged interpretation of a written or an oral discourse. Words, for instance, may have different meanings for different participants. This has implications for the way the data is collected and analysed i.e. meanings have to be

checked with participants during data collection and participants need to have some involvement in the analysis. This was particularly relevant to Phase 1 which reflected the students' perspective as opposed to Phase 2 which solely considered the practitioner-researcher perspective.

### ***Literature review***

The literature review was framed by the student responses in Phase 1. It focused particularly on the link between the learners' beliefs and existing literature through exploring primarily the key areas highlighted by the focus group participants, including the role of the teacher in the learning process.

### ***Postmodernism and a social constructivist perspective***

A social constructivist approach to knowledge and its acquisition fits in with the postmodernist orientation/poststructuralist stance outlined earlier, in that it implies a local/personal construction of the broader social context and the relativity of language structures and meanings. Both my philosophical and theoretical position in undertaking this study has been strongly influenced by constructivist theories of learning. Benson (2001, p. 35) citing Candy (1991, p. 252) broadly describes constructivism as "a cluster of approaches which hold that knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner." Constructivism, described in these terms, forms the basis for the concept of autonomy outlined earlier. Benson (2001, p. 36) citing Paris and Byrnes (1989, p.170) links constructivism with psychological theories of learning which assume that "knowledge is produced through socially conditioned processes of interpretation" (p. 36). A constructivist view of learning, therefore, stresses the importance of the learner's full participation in the learning process for learning to be effective (Benson, 2001, p. 36).

### ***My role as a researcher-practitioner***

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest that the qualitative/phenomenological researcher adopts the posture of "indwelling" which they define as living between and within the research meaning: "being at one with the person under investigation, walking a mile in the other person's shoes, or understanding the person's point of view from an empathic rather than a sympathetic position" (p. 25). It is, however, clear that my position as one of the voices in the research constitutes more than in dwelling. My own reflection and reflexivity here form an integral part of the research process. I became one of the learners as a learner

researcher practitioner within the study, giving my “voice” no more authority than that of the learners. My research diary extract as a learner-researcher practitioner were analysed in Phase 2 using similar criteria to the ones used in the self-evaluation reports and diaries (see Phase 2 data collection, example of data/analysis and outcomes).

### ***Scope and limitations of the research***

Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 145) speak of the "trustworthiness" of the research, in relation to its validity. A detailed description of the research process and its expected outcomes can act as a basis for assessing its credibility (Nunan, 1992; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Transparency is an essential feature of qualitative research, particularly a clear audit trail incorporating relevant materials to help readers "walk through the work from beginning to end" (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 145). Face validity is another way of considering whether the results of an investigation are valid. Face validity depends on whether the results seem valid i.e. whether they resonate with the audience's experiences or whether they have a predictive quality (Krueger, 1994, p. 32). Given its postmodern orientation, how this study's findings resonate with the readers' experience and perception of “reality” played an important role in “validating” its results as well as its process of enquiry. From a postmodernist perspective, Smith and Hodkinson (2009, p. 38) stress that external evidence cannot force or coerce individuals' agreement to “see the social and educational world in the same way.” The reader must be taken through the research journey and convinced by the author's arguments.

## **Using a Postmodernist and Social Constructivist Perspective in Practice**

### ***Data collection methods and analysis for Phases 1 and 2***

As stated earlier, the research was subdivided into two Phases:

- *Phase 1* which was concerned with accessing learners' 'voices' through focus groups i.e. the student learners' and through a reflective diary for the learner practitioner-researcher's as well as other 'learner' practitioner- researchers'/ researchers' 'voices' from the literature, leading to a revised construct;

- *Phase 2* which used the revised construct as the theoretical framework to the analysis of 28 self-evaluation reports and five detailed research diaries, drawn from the same learners as the Phase 1 focus groups' participants, including the learner practitioner-researcher, for evidence of 'autonomy in practice', in order to assess the construct's usefulness as well as the autonomy of all the learners involved. The outcome of Phase 2 would determine further intervention through curriculum and assessment design at the advanced stages on the ULS.

### ***Phase 1 Data Collection Process, Examples of Data/analysis and Outcomes***

#### *Focus Group Process*

Phase 1 used focus group described by Krueger (1994, p. 19) as group interactions aimed at gauging feelings, ways of thinking and perceptions which may differ between participants rather than seeking any consensus.

- groups are selected because they have common characteristics that relate to the topic of the focus group, in this case they are all advanced learners;
- the focus group is repeated several times with different people;
- typically, a focus group approach will consist of a minimum of three focus groups but could involve as many as several dozen;
- the group discussion is conducted several times with similar participants to identify trends and patterns in perception.

During Phase 1 of the study, four focus groups of between two (group 2) and five participants (group 3) met between one and three times over one academic year (see O'Leary, 2010), for a duration of one to one and a half hours as recommended by Krueger (1994). In total, six focus group meetings were carried out: Group 1 met three times, Group 2 once, Group 3 met once and Group 4 once. I had hoped for more meetings with Groups 2-4 but workloads due to end of year exams limited volunteers' availability. The group consisted of student volunteers studying French at Stage 6 (groups 1 & 3) and French at Stage 5 (groups 2 & 4). Participants in each group were all experienced language learners studying at the same

stage and in the same class with me as their teacher, with the exception of Group 4 (3 students).

The Focus groups were carried out in line with standard ethical consideration, including confidentiality and the opportunity to withdraw at any point. An interview guide was drawn up before each focus group with a summary of the outcomes of previous group meetings and other focus groups as applicable, presented at the beginning of each meeting (Krueger, 1994; Banister et al., 1994; Arskey & Knight, 1999). In order to access their constructions of the learning process both generally and with regards to languages, participants were asked to: identify the characteristics of a *good teacher/language teacher*; a *good learner/language learner*; describe *successful* and *unsuccessful learning experiences* both generally and for languages; reflect on their own acquisition of *language proficiency* and outline their *plan for future language learning* after University. These questions were kept sufficiently broad to cover their learning/language learning experience in HE, rather than focusing on the last two years when I taught most of them. This was intended to mitigate the inequalities in the power relationship, as I taught some of them. Krueger (1994) suggests that the researcher may wish to modify the question structure and timing to get “confirmation of emerging themes and ideas” (p. 145). He observes that “typically the first focus group yields a considerable amount of information,” in my case Group 1, however “each additional focus group produces decreasing amounts of new insights” (op cit: 135). He suggests that some questions “might be eliminated altogether” if there is “saturation” i.e. no further insight. I used summaries drawn up with the participants to devise the next interview guide for the following group meetings. Some minor modifications were made to the structure of interview guides as the study progressed. In particular, learner and teacher were interchanged to try and elicit more data on the learner in Groups 2, 3 and 4.

### *Recording and analysing the data*

In relation to the analysis of the data, Krueger (1994, pp. 143-144) identifies five possible options :1) a transcript-based analysis; 2) a taped-based analysis using an abridged transcript based on careful listening of the tape; 3) a note-based analysis; 4) a debriefing session and summary comments at the conclusion of the focus group; and 5) memory-based analysis where an oral account is presented. The approach I adopted is a mixture of the second and

third options, with some further adaptation: part of the analysis and the “debriefing” elements of the third option taking place with the participants as co-constructors/co-researchers in relation to the preliminary findings, as recorded on the flip charts; and I used the tape to produce partial transcripts.

The interviews were conducted in English (their L1) using a “brainstorming” approach in so far as each participant’s contributions were recorded, using as much as possible the participants’ own words, for instance *Approachability* (Scott<sup>vi</sup>, Group 1, meeting 1), *Self-motivated* (Lesley, Group 3), *Curious person* (Dallera, Group 4) and *Participation* (Gregory, Group 2). I recapped the student’s responses so far on a number of occasions, throughout the interview, using the statements written on the flip charts to partly analyse the data with the participants. The following extracts from Group 1, meeting 1 show how the data was collected interactively (in conversation) with the themes identified in the presence of the participants:

[Researcher (COL) writing headings: “What makes a good teacher/ what makes a good learner” on different pages of the flip chart.]

*Researcher (COL): Let’s start with the Teacher, sort of brainstorming. What makes a good teacher?*

*ANNA-MARIE: Someone who cares about students.*

*Researcher (COL): In what way?*

*ANNA-MARIE: cares about the students, about the learning not about their pay packets at the end of the day.*

*Researcher (COL): right, so somebody who cares about students’ progress.*

*ANNA-MARIE: Yes, yes.*

[Researcher (COL) writes “student progress” on the flip chart]

[....]

*SCOTT: Somebody who understands students what they do and what they want.*

[Researcher (COL) writes on the flip chart

Somebody who understands students/ what they do/ what they want (SCOTT)]

*Researcher (COL): That’s interesting, what sorts of things would you say students want?*



*SCOTT: Every student is an individual, [they] want different things. So it's understanding, I don't know, the different students in your class and their objectives.*

*You know which students are good. You know what they want.*

*Researcher (COL): Do you mean being aware of the needs of the students?*

*SCOTT: Know which students are good, who wants to get on.*

*ANNA-MARIE: What's their objectives.*

*JANINE: Within that, you know when students need more help as well.*

*Researcher (COL): so? [Researcher (COL) starts writing on the chart*

*Understand different students and their objectives (SCOTT, ANNA-MARIE)]*

Krueger (1994, p. 115) identifies two essential techniques to moderate group discussions namely: “the 5 second pause and the probe” (Ibid), in order to elicit additional information. From a poststructuralist standpoint, probing was used to seek clarification of the various concepts mentioned by the participants, for instance, ‘self-motivated’ (Group 3):

*Researcher (COL): What do you mean by self-motivated?*

*LESLEY: To be a good learner, you have not just to go to your lessons but you've got to be motivated at home to do the work and learn yourself.*

Students were then asked to rank the themes in order of importance with variation in ranking between participants noted on the flip chart such as the extract below from Group 3, meeting 1 concerning the good language learner:

- *Good Language Learner (additional characteristics) [ as written on flip chart]*
- *Time out of lesson-learning vocab and grammar*
- *Interested in the subject 1 (SIAN/ JOCELYN)/ ½ FRANCES (also valid outside of languages)*
- *Very attentive -pronunciation 1 (DAVID)*
- *Immersion in the target language 1 (LESLEY).*

The ranking gave an idea of the group's position but also had the potential to highlight

differences of opinion in relation to importance of, and/or support for different statements, after they were recorded.

### ***Findings***

As illustrated by the extracts from flip chart summaries in the Appendix, the key findings from the Focus groups highlighted: the importance of the *affective dimension*, particularly the *student-teacher relationship*; the *centrality of the teacher* in the learning process in their mind; the high expectation of the *teacher's subject expertise*; and their recognition that effective learning depends on the learners' *ability to work independently* together with an awareness of the benefits of *collaboration/peer support*.

The findings were used to frame the literature review with a view to developing a conceptual framework for the development of autonomy on the advanced levels of the ULS, which is more aligned with our students' beliefs and experience i.e. more 'in tune' with their 'voices'.

### ***The Literature Review***

Based on the main themes identified in Phase 1, the review of existing literature focused, more particularly, on theories and case study research relating to *affect*, including motivation, and cognition/metacognition both from *individual* and *collaborative perspectives*, together with the *role of the teacher* within the learning process.

Although the students' construction of learning (and teaching) were very much what I expected from my own discussions with students, particularly in relation to the inspirational practitioner, I was surprised at the place given to affect in the participants' responses. At these levels of study, the affective dimension is seldom considered, particularly in relation to learner development and/or training. This aspect and other finding implications, including learner motivation and the role of collaboration, led to a revised definition and model which emphasized the importance of affect as a category in its own right (as opposed to being implied within the others), as shown below.

### ***A Revised Conceptualisation and Theoretical Model***

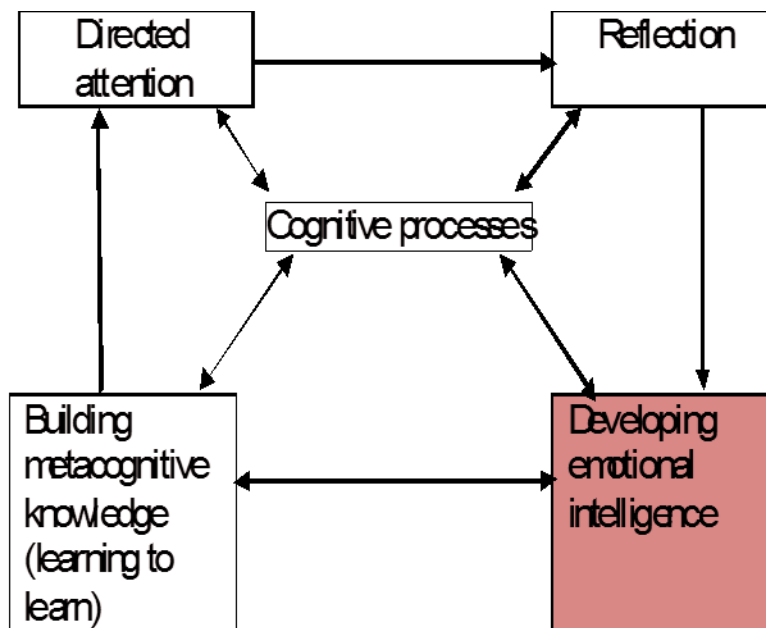


Figure 2. A model for the development of autonomy: individual level. The psychology of autonomous learning, adapted from Benson (2001, p. 86) (O'Leary, 2014, p. 21).

*Phase 2 Data Collection, Example of Data/analysis and Outcomes*

Based on the revised model of control over cognitive processes, I analysed 28 self-evaluation reports (students produce only one per portfolio-based assessment) and five learner diaries from the student learners (diaries were not compulsory and only five students completed theirs) as well as entries from my own research diaries, as a learner practitioner-researcher, for evidence of control over cognitive processes, using the following broad categories:

- *attention*: active engagement with linguistic input, involving conscious apprehension and awareness of specific aspects of the language;
- *metacognitive knowledge* at task level encompassing: any evidence of decision to carry out the task, decisions about content, progression, place and time of learning, the selection and use of cognitive strategies, and the criteria selected for evaluation;
- *reflection*: any form of reflection on the language, the learning process, their role within that process and so on;

- *emotional intelligence (affect)*: any evidence of attempting to lower their own anxiety, encouraging themselves, taking their emotional temperature as well as empathizing and cooperating with others.

There was some significant overlap between the categories so the choice of which evidence to list under one rather than another could be arbitrary. However, all the evidence contributed to demonstrating control over cognitive processes as proxy for evidence of autonomy.

### ***Self-evaluation reports***

The findings suggested that, in practice, the student learners displayed *some degree of autonomy*. Contrary to expectations based on the focus group data, reliance on tutor support and subject expertise appeared to be more limited than expected, although there was a discrepancy between the diary entries and the self-evaluation in this area which would be worth exploring further. A few extracts below illustrate the data analysis:

*Attention* Although perhaps most difficult to identify, 7 out of the 28 self-evaluation reports indicated a focus on particular linguistic aspects such as specific items of vocabulary:

*I also learnt a lot of new vocabulary as the medical and legal French was quite complicated (SE9)<sup>vii</sup>*

or specific linguistic skills such as grammar:

*Thanks to this report, I think I have made a lot of progress, particularly as far as my vocabulary and grammar are concerned (SE20).*

*Task Knowledge (Metacognitive knowledge at task level)* was quite complex since the task's aims included more than just linguistic development. The task knowledge implicit in the students' self-evaluation could relate to generic skills, subject knowledge as well as language learning. A number of students appeared to approach the task in a holistic way rather than attempt to distinguish between the various aspects of the learning experience. The distinction between metacognition and reflection was also quite difficult and many statements could be

accommodated in either. In the typical example below, the student was approaching the task in a way that is contrary to the advice given i.e. to find a theme/topic then plan the content of the report and then search for available sources. Only seven out of the 28 self-evaluations referred to the chosen/theme topic at the beginning.

*In doing the portfolio, I found a new way of working: research then write. When I write something for my law course, I write, and then I find examples or quotations to support what I think. (SE 12)*

This constituted an indication of some degree of autonomy in the way content is selected based on their prior experience.

*Reflection:* All the self-evaluation reports contained some form of reflection which is to be expected since their stated purpose is reflection on the learning experience. Not all students covered all the aspects. In fact, learners seemed to have focused on negative aspects as well as positive ones. 13 out of the 28 self-evaluation reports started with difficulties experienced with sources such as:

*It was difficult to find sites which simply covered law (SE11).*

15 out of the 28 reports highlighted linguistic progress as part of their reflection. Six focused on the acquisition of specialist language, particularly vocabulary:

*I have learnt more vocabulary relating to my subject and I have developed my skills. (SE10)*

A minority (around 4 of the 28 self-evaluation reports) mentioned an improvement in skills such as reading and writing or more specific ones such as summarising:

*I have learnt how to do summaries, and now I can write a summary when I want. (SE17)*

Some described progress in very general terms or simply stated that vocabulary and/or grammar had improved. Only two self-evaluation reports identified some weaknesses and suggested how they might remedy them:

*Generally, I am pleased with my progress but sometimes my grammar isn't perfect because I have forgotten certain aspects and I need to revise these. (SE27)*

*Emotional intelligence (affect)* was limited to motivation/engagement:

*This project has given me a sense of achievement; also I have put a lot of time and effort into the project. (SE9)*

The *role/influence of the tutor*, was not as prominent as might have been expected from Phase 1 findings. Despite the central role given to the teacher in Phase 1, only two students referred to the influence of the tutor on their progress:

*[..].the meetings with my tutor ensured that I made regular progress (SE14)*

and

*The comments, corrections, advice and recommendations of my tutor guided me. (SE5)*

### ***Learner diaries***

The five learner diaries ranged from weekly detailed accounts to a one sentence entry against a list of dates. In terms of process, four out of the five started with the search for sources and the problem associated with this:

*During the Christmas holidays, I have researched several interesting subjects on the internet relating to law. (LD19)*

Four out of the five referred to a tutor. A typical entry simply mentioned the existence of an appointment with the tutor. Only one diary gives a detailed account of discussions and their outcome:

*I arranged an appointment with Mrs O [...] to check the progress of my research. We examined the sources I had found on work legislation and my ideas on how to plan the report.*<sup>viii</sup> (LD 19)

The tutor was generally mentioned several times, up to five in one learner diary, LD3. This was in sharp contrast with the self-evaluation reports which are supposed to be based on diary entries. The teacher was not even mentioned once in SE3 relating to the above mentioned diary. The explanation could lie with what they understood a self-evaluation task to be. The available diaries included more information on the role of other agents such as the teacher and much less on reflection about the task and their own progress.

### ***Learner-researcher practitioner diary***

My own diaries were analysed using the same categories as for the students'. In all 27 entries between 10 and 20 pages long were analysed. The extracts gave a flavour of the context of the research as I 'lived' it / perceived it.

*Attention* was as difficult to identify as in the case of the student learners. This was perhaps even more the case because my focus was not language as such. However, the following extract from a diary entry suggested a focus on terminology although this is inextricably linked with concepts and therefore overlaps with reflection.

*What is self-directed learning as we understand it? Is that the outcome of "proactive autonomy" whilst directed learning would be the outcome of "reactive autonomy" or is it something different altogether? (DOL 1<sup>ix</sup>)*

*Task Knowledge (Metacognitive knowledge at task level)* was an aspect which had quite extensive coverage both in relation to literature review and the field work. The following extract which was typical of many entries throughout the three years encompass evidence of the decision to carry out the task, select its content and use of cognitive strategies:

*[I] decided to spend the afternoon finishing “interviewing for social scientists”. The analysis and profile must be written (DOL 4)*

*Reflection* as in the case of the student learners and as might be expected from the nature of a diary is wide-ranging. The diary entries included reflection on concepts and theories, research process, student achievements relating to the study and dealing with dependent students

*My last focus group ran just before Easter with a number of stage 4<sup>x</sup> students (3 actually since 2 didn't turn up). The mix of the group was very different from the previous ones- [...] they were all reasonably cosmopolitan- an ‘independent’ group who were confident of their language ability. They also must have learnt an awful lot of the language whilst abroad and yet were still prepared to assert the centrality of the teacher in the learning process. (DOL 10)*

*Emotional intelligence (Affect)* unlike the other two categories, in the same way as in the case of the student learners, there was little explicit evidence of “control over affect” although there were a few examples of dialogue relating to curriculum development (partially influenced by the study) which could fit within the social dimension of affect i.e. “empathising” and “cooperating with others” as illustrated by the extracts below:

*We discussed the development of the new ULS 6 module for the linguists. The meeting was tense. FD and GM who had taught translation and interpreting on BAIBL [the old degree programme] were not keen on portfolios because they were worried about marking workload. [...]I discussed the success of 6A, including my*



*own research, and mooted the possibility of including a collaborative task to encourage peer support. This seems to appeal to most, except for Italian who had small numbers anyway [...]. We discussed criteria. I did not really wish to include performance but was outnumbered. I did argue about it being 'low stakes' and we settled for 20% (DOL 12)*

*The role of the teacher (read here supervisor)* was mentioned explicitly in a small number of entries (5 out of 27) but tails back as the thesis progressed. The entries referred to two aspects of the supervisor's role: help/feedback and as a 'motivator' to undertake the various activities relating to the thesis.

Whilst Phase 2 concluded that there was some clear indication of the students demonstrating their autonomy in relation to other aspects, explicit *evidence of control* over the *affective dimension* was limited. Apart from one or two of the Learner-researcher practitioner's diary entries, there was *no evidence* in relation to *cooperation* or other *relational aspects* such as empathy with other learners, despite the prominence given to those aspects by the focus groups' participants who were the authors of the majority of the self-evaluation reports. These findings suggested the need for *collaborative activities* and for paying *more attention* to the *affective dimension* of the *learning process*, through raising learners' awareness at an individual as well as a collective level. Creating more opportunities for collaboration with peers and encouraging students to engage with, as well as articulate, the emotional dimension of the learning experience was something which the language team, consisting of all the module leaders of the advanced ULS stages, myself included, considered and developed through revising the curriculum delivery and assessment of the ULS 5, 6A and 6B modules as a result of discussions arising from the outcomes of the study. In relation to the affective dimension, in particular, we now encourage feedback to peers and self-evaluation relating to these issues after discussing these aspects in class.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, Phase 1 of the research enabled the identification of emotional intelligence or meta-affect as an important element in the development of autonomy, leading to its addition to Benson's (2011) model. Phase 2 showed how the new construct/model could be used to

assess the development of autonomy in practice, despite some difficulty with the “attention” criteria. Although all the self-evaluation reports demonstrated that students had developed a degree of autonomy, including some independence from the teacher, evidence of the development of meta-affect was absent.

As demonstrated by the overview of the methodology and the above brief account of its outcomes, I found the postmodern orientation to be an empowering approach to the use of theories and frameworks; avoiding closing down or limiting the ways in which participants can be understood or “conceive of themselves.” It facilitated a dynamic research design and the adaptation as well as use of existing theories. It also gave me the opportunity to articulate my own voice openly through the analysis of my diary entries and reflection sections, rather than covertly. The student voice changed my perception that metacognition was the most important element in the development of autonomy. The change of emphasis in my own understanding of autonomy and focus of research is best reflected by the new broader title of “*Developing autonomous language learners within the HE curriculum: a postmodern and social constructivist perspective*” finally adopted for the study. This has also impacted on the way I now approach learner development, in my own practice, particularly in relation to the affective dimension which now forms an integral part of class discussions as well as oral and written peer and tutor feedback, with some initial evidence of success (see O’Leary, 2014).

### **Review Process**

This paper was peer-reviewed by the following contributors to Issue 2, Ryo Moriya. It was also blind peer-reviewed by members of the Learner Development Journal Review Network.

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## Appendix A

### **Focus group 1- - Stage 5- meeting 1**

**Present: Scott , Janine and Anna-Marie**

#### **What makes a good teacher?**

- Somebody who cares about students progress/ students' experience
- Approachability
- Good listener
- Somebody who understands students/ what they do/ What they want
  - understands different students and their objectives
  - being aware of the needs of students
  - needs to be able to reach the students to inspire them
- Break down barriers between students and teachers- encourages (social worker sort of role)
- Teacher should have an interest in the subject-/passion & enthusiasm which is transmitted to students
- Help should be readily available- they should make time. Job= teaching students therefore should be a priority
- Recognition & rewards to good students
  - prizes/ certificates
  - a word of praise/ book tokens
  - motivation-competition between students
- Main role of the teacher is to get the students to learn
- Ask the students what would motivate them/ setting achievable goals
- Teaching style on the level with their students
- Patience- empathy with students' difficulties
- Know how to handle different students- more experienced teachers appear more confident
- Classroom management/ discipline
- organisation

#### **What makes a good learner ?**

- Hard-work
  - make sure you do your homework +reading round or doing something extra
  - ask for help and advice
  - look what you are supposed to have learnt from homework
- Willingness to work
- Learner aware of objectives given by teacher/ to make themselves acquainted with the subject
- Work on their own + go back to teacher with questions- tutors= main experts/ source of advice
- Main objectives= to pass the subject/ to know enough about the subject to pass (major)
- Understanding the subject for further studies (minor)
- the ability to prioritise what they need to learn
- Making friends (minor)
- Enjoying the subject
- Doing extra work to find out more

- Relating to real life
- Looking at background/ concrete examples from

### **Good teacher (follow-up from last focus group)**

- Subject knowledge- 1= (link to enthusiasm for their subject/ teaching)
- Empathy (understanding student needs/ objectives) 4=
- Approachability 4= (link with empathy)
- Experience 3= (link classroom management/ knowledge of teaching methodologies/ how to teach)
- Good preparation 2= (link with organisation)  
Classroom management 3= ((link experience/ knowledge of teaching methodologies/ how to teach)
- organisation 2=(link with good preparation)
- Enthusiasm for their subject/ teaching 1= (link with subject knowledge)
- Knowledge of teaching methodologies/ how to teach 3= (link classroom management/experience)

### **Good learner- More general points applying to both School and HE**

- Willing to do (hard)- work- willingness to learn/ motivation/ organisation/ target setting 1
- Ability to prioritise what they need to learn HE 3= (equal to recognition motivator/ pressure)
- Willing to do extra work/ to find out more -using theory + applying own experience 4=
- Interest in the subject studied 2 (interest=experience)

School different from HE- HE requires self-motivation/ learning to be independent. Independence taught gradually.

### **Think of activities when you really learnt something-What/ how/ where/why**

Example 1- Working for a seminar. Had to do research and then present it at University. Worked because there was structure and discussion. You did your research, shared ideas and took time.

Example 2- Revision for an exam. Involved group work and discussion in bedroom in France. Successful because worked together as a team / shared

Example 3- Research. Had to visit various places/ sites around the region-to be completed

Example 4- Revision. Group work- shared your understanding of the concepts /brain storming in library and bedroom. Sharing ideas and concepts/ different points of view /



## Focus group 1, meeting 2 (continued)

**Think of activities when you didn't learn** What, how, where and why

Example 1-Law lesson in France. Couldn't understand. Paid no attention/ switched off/ confused. At university in France. Couldn't engage in the learning.

Example 2- Group work. Somebody tries to lead/ there is competition/ unequal effort. At School. In HE, it is better. You do your own work but have no overview. Boredom/ lack of interaction.

## Focus Group 3- Stage 5- Meeting 1 (only one meeting with this group)

**Present: David, Sian, Lesley, Jocelyn and Frances.**

### Good Learner

- Self-motivated 1
  - want to learn
  - able to be motivated & learn yourself
- Good listener 3= ( equal to attendance/ participation)
  - open-minded- understands & accept others' opinions
- Take time to understand 2= (equal to well-organised)
- Well-organised- organisation/ time management 2= (equal to take time to understand)
- Attendance 3= (equal to take time to understand/ participation)
- Participation 3= (equal to attendance/ good listener)

### •Good language learner (*additional characteristics*)

- Time out of lesson- learning vocab and grammar.
- Interested in the subject 1 (Sian/ Jocelyn)/ 1/ 2 (Frances) [also valid outside of languages]
- Very attentive- pronunciation 1 (David)
- Immersion in the target language 1 (Lesley)
  - Language- listening to radio/ reading etc..
- Need to sustain effort- learning process gradual

### Good Teacher

- Able to come down to the level of the learner 2= ( equal to patience)
- No favouritism- no preference for more able people
- Patience 2= (equal to able to come down to the level of the learner/ Relate to students/ Confident)

- Good in-depth knowledge of the subject 1=
- varies the lesson 3=
- involves the student in the lesson- encourage participation 3
  - by not talking too much
  - ask students' opinion
  - group work- classroom discussion
  - move around the class to individual students
  - uses visual aids rather than talking
- Relate to students 2= (equal to able to come down to the level of the learner/  
patience/ Confident)
  - not too serious
  - approachability
  - personality
- Confident 2= (equal to able to come down to the level of the learner/  
patience)

## End notes

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<sup>i</sup> Modules refer to the constitutive elements of a course or programme of study. Undergraduates students typically study 6 X 20 credit modules a year or a total of 18 (360 credits) for a three year undergraduate degree.

<sup>ii</sup> Common European Framework for Languages

<sup>iii</sup> The percentage has varied every year based on module review across all languages.

<sup>iv</sup> When the portfolio was worth 10% of the overall module mark, the negotiating oral and reports were done outside the portfolio as summative tasks worth 25% each.

<sup>v</sup> This is my description of the author's research framework rather than their own.

<sup>vi</sup> Different Christian names were used to preserve confidentiality

<sup>vii</sup> Self-Evaluation- Portfolio 9

<sup>viii</sup> Translated from the French.

<sup>ix</sup> Diary-Learner practitioner-researcher (COL) with extract no

<sup>x</sup> These are referred as Stage 5 students in the study..